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philosophy and navigating intramuscular scholarly debates. However understandable that was, it is time, Afolayan and Falola suggest, for “African philosophy to get on the street and get their theories dirtied by the predicament on the continent” (Afolayan and Falola 2017, 12). In other words, African philosophy should embrace its status as a “(2017). Following Leonard Harris (following Frederick Douglass), calls a “philosophy born of struggle.” This is clearly one of the overriding themes for African philosophy as a whole and should be added to the list. Philosophy born of struggle (that is philosophical reflection that is a byproduct of struggle) is not a bizarre exercise devoted to unwinding abstract puzzles, or it is not just or always or most crucially that. It is (among other things) a practice of bringing philosophical impulses and resources to bear on certain pressing problems of life, and of exercising philosophical impulses unrelated to those problems—impulses related instead, say, to beauty, or to the theory of knowledge—despite the burdens of frequently problematic situations) 4.2 Regional continuities and discontinuities Scholars routinely distinguish three broad regional approaches to African philosophy, one for the continent of Africa and two for the regions where the vast majority of participants in the diaspora reside: the Caribbean and the Americas. These regions are not just geographically distinct but also have importantly different histories and constellations of cultures, not least because of the internal complexities that complicate region-wide generalizations. In addition, these different regions occupy different places in global networks for mainstream knowledge production, which gives them different, and differently weighted, opportunities for publishing and scholarly exchange. In light of these conditions, it is not surprising that the occupants of each region often find themselves taking up distinctive questions and problems, and pursuing them using modes of philosophical reflection and generic touchstones—specific texts and figures—that are to some degree regionally specific. Regional specificity notwithstanding, the condition of Africanity means in part that important thematic continuities stretch across the regions. Some concern the role of violence in anti-racist struggle, the meaning of African roots for people in the diaspora, and the tensions between race-based, class-based, and gender-based approaches to social justice that call forth talk of intersectionality and related concepts. Others are importantly rooted in the overarching themes noted above, with special emphasis on decolonization, anti-slavery agitation, and anti-imperial struggle. Despite these continuities, concerns that distinguish the regions are not far to seek. For example, Gordon (2008) reasonably suggests that the question of the modern might be one of African philosophy’s unifying themes. But each region tends to adopt its own approach. African thinkers often explore the relationship between modernity and tradition, sometimes linking the prospects for liberation to the prospects for modernizing Africa, while at other times complicating the easy distinction between the traditional and the modern and the easy caution of modernization with civilization and of both with Europe. Afro-Caribbean thinkers, by contrast, tend to be less interested in a distant “traditional” world than in the world that resulted from the collision of forced migrants, indigenous peoples, and settler colonists. This approach eventuates in, among much else, Edouard Glissant’s (1989) studies of creolité. In the Americas, finally, different demographic conditions and historical trajectories led many (but of course not all) prominent figures to turn the question of tradition into debates about racial uplift and racial integration. 4.3 Complications The period of emergence set the stage for contemporary work in African philosophy by establishing many of the key elements that would come to define the field. Careful study of the period, however, reveals some important challenges that continue to confront contemporary work. One important complication is the overlay of bias that constrains standard notions of what counts as an intellectual contribution and of who counts as a contributor. The standard notions tend to focus on the written output of elite men, even in studies of populations, cultures, and societies that are not at the top of the relevant social hierarchies. Considering the reasons for these biases is beyond the scope of this piece, though we can say that some reasons are better than others. (To be sure, writerly output—literature—is easier to track and preserve than orature. But even the written contributions of women are routinely ignored or excluded from the economies of writerly production.) Suffice it to say for now that one of the recurring challenges of African thought in its philosophical modes has to do with crediting the philosophical labor that goes into assembling a responsible life under absurd conditions, when the laborers don’t look or act like standard-issue philosophers. For recent thinkers like Fred Moten (2017) in his study of artist Thornton Dial, this is sometimes a question about the philosophical significance of aesthetic production. For others, as we’ll soon consider further, it is a question about the philosophical content of political activism or of vernacular cultures. It is almost always, of course, a question about crediting the work of women and people without wealth, high income homes, and other markers of high socioeconomic status. A second important complication is rooted in a simple question: what happens to local or national traditions if one focuses on broadly regional approaches to African philosophy? One way to ask this question is to focus on the differences between, say, Haiti and Jamaica, and on the differences between Antenor Firmin and Marcus Garvey. Another way is to insist on the integrity and importance of distinct national traditions of recognized and recognizably philosophical activity, as Teodoros Kiros (2004) and a number of scholars do in relation to figures like the 17th century Ethiopian philosopher Zera Yacob. There are two things to say about this possible tension between the regional or transnational and the local or national. First, it is eminently possible for analyses at different scales to co-exist. The question is just whether there is sufficient warrant to sustain an analysis at each level. One of the main aims of the early stages of professional African philosophy, as we’ll soon see, was precisely to show that there was a transnational enterprise related to Africanity that required—and had long provoked—philosophical reflection. This in no way precludes more local studies. Second, one of the central claims of African philosophy is that local contexts are often profoundly informed by broader dynamics. Whether those dynamics matter in specific cases is a matter to be settled by appeal to the details of the cases. One undeniable feature of the modern world is the way globe-spanning ideas about things like race, reason, and civilization have shaped the life chances of large swathes of humanity for generations. This would seem to have some bearing on philosophical activity in African communities and communities in its diaspora. 5. Stage two: establishment and consolidation The first phase of African philosophy’s emergence eventually gives way to a period of establishment and consolidation for the field as a field. During this time the themes and concerns from the earlier philosophies born of struggle, infected by regional concerns, make their way into the orbit of professional philosophy. Along the way, they get translated into the distinctive vocabularies of the discipline’s subfields and methodological tools, creatively expanding those vocabularies in the process. (Or they acknowledge the possibility of this translation and resist or complicate it.) We can say that the first phase ends and emergence gives way to establishment when the field begins to get traction among teachers and researchers in academic philosophy. Kwasi Wiredu explains in his classic Companion to African Philosophy that this didn’t begin to happen in African universities until the middle to late sixties, as independence ushered in “significant numbers of post-independence African academics” (Wiredu 2004, 2). Similarly, Outlaw points out that the field has become more established as “successive generations of persons of African descent have entered the profession” in the wake of anti-racist liberation struggles, and as these persons organized conferences and other mechanisms for networking and scholarly exchange, often across national and regional boundaries (Outlaw 2017, §10, par. 2). If establishment begins with the arrival of Wiredu’s and Outlaw’s academics, it reaches its apex in the 1980s. This is the point at which a number of germinal contributions make their way into print. Think here of Richard A. Wright’s African Philosophy: An Introduction (1984), Cornel West’s Prophesy Deliverance! (1982), Angela Davis’s Women, Race, and Class (1983), the first edition of Leonard Harris’s Philosophy Born of Struggle (1983), V. Y. Mudimbe’s The Invention of Africa (1988), and Edouard Glissant’s Caribbean Discourses (1989). The 1990s and early 2000s were the years of consolidation. This is the point at which a wave of more securely positioned scholarly professionals produced work destined for wider influence than the work of the previous era. Think here of Kwame Anthony Appiah’s In My Father’s House (1993), Charles W. Mills’s The Racial Contract (1997), Lucius T. Outlaw Jr.’s On Race and Philosophy (1996), Lewis R. Gordon’s Bad Faith and Antiracist Racism (1995), Paget Henry’s Caliban’s Reason (2000), Kwame Gyekye’s Tradition and Modernity (1997), the first edition of Patricia Hill Collins’s Black Feminist Thought (1990), and the revised edition of Bernard R. Boxill’s Blacks and Social Justice (1992). As African philosophy becomes a professionally recognized field (as opposed to a vibrant but heterodox enterprise or tradition, overlapping only slightly with mainstream knowledge production), the work begins, one might say, to riff on the discipline’s accepted movements and schools. African professional philosophers put mainstream professional resources into conversation with many of the concerns and innovations that animated the earlier philosophies born of struggle. Far from simply applying sophisticated resources to pre-philosophical raw material, this exercise at its best blends two modes of philosophical reflection. One enjoys mainstream recognition, while the other benefits from testing and refinement by application in areas that its counterpart ignores; and each can, in principle, compensate for shortcomings in the other. What results is work that often—as Moten, following Robinson, says of Black radical Marxism—involves both “retention and disruption, originality and response” (Moten 2017, 9–10).[3] (It is also what one might say of the difference that Afro-diasporic musical practices made in and to European traditions, producing new forms like samba and jazz along the way. Hence the appeal to “riffing.”) Understanding this transformative, improvisational relationship is a precondition to properly locating the contributions to the periods of emergence and consolidation. With this in mind one can acknowledge that Davis and Outlaw both contribute to and draw from the tradition of critical theory, without diminishing either their originality or their traditional fluency. In similar ways, West and Harris riff on the pragmatist tradition, Mudimbe and Glissant creatively appropriate and employ post-structuralist resources, Gordon and Henry, following William R. Jones and others,[4] develop an African form of existential phenomenology, and Appiah and Boxill represent African thought in an analytic key. I’ll somewhat arbitrarily nominate 2003–2004 as the cutoff between the period of consolidation and the contemporary moment. These years saw the publication of Tommy L. Lott and John P. Pittman’s Companion to African-American Philosophy and Wiredu’s Companion to African Philosophy. I would say of both volumes something like what Afolayan and Falola say of the Wiredu volume: that they constitute “a significant nod to the appearance of African[a] philosophy in ... global academe” (Afolayan and Falola 2017, 1). 6. Reading the contemporary—structure Contemporary African philosophy builds on the periods of emergence, establishment, and consolidation in four broad ways. Some thinkers work to fortify and expand the field’s store of germinal texts and figures. Others continue to improvise on the defining traits of the mainstream schools and movements. Still others complicate and broaden the map of regional preoccupations. And interventions of all three types push new themes and debates, or new takes on older themes and debates, toward the center of the field. The first three will be the subject of this section, while the fourth will be the subject of Section 7. 6.1 Fortifying and expanding, tentpoles and theoretical archeology One benefit of the long run up to the contemporary moment in African philosophy is that a tradition of thought has emerged with core figures, texts, and questions. The tradition itself then becomes grist for the mill of philosophical activity. Some of this activity goes to identifying and shoring up (what some people think of as) the historical foundations of the field, while some goes to expanding the edifice that has been built atop those foundations. One version of what I’m referring to as fortification or shoring up is the outcome of a heightened focus on a few high-profile icons—call this the “tentpole approach.” These are notables like Cooper, Du Bois, and Fanon, the touchstone figures—Gordon refers to them as the pillars of African American philosophy—with the clearest prima facie cases for canonical status. As more philosophers examine the work of these figures and produce more commentary on them and each other, subfields start to grow up around them. This gives African philosophy that familiar subdisciplinary shape, whereby anyone who knows anything about the area must have something to say about a handful of towering figures. One clear and influential example of this sort of intervention is Robert Gooding-Williams’s (2009) magisterial In the Shadow of Du Bois. The tentpole approach is useful not just for fortification but also for expansion. The expansionist version focuses on iconic figures that have yet to receive the sort of attention from philosophers that they’ve received elsewhere. The aim here—sometimes explicitly undertaken as an exercise in Africanist thought, sometimes simply as an exercise in responsible scholarship—is to give figures like James Baldwin, Martin Luther King, Jr., Lorraine Hansberry, and Audre Lorde the kind of attention that Gordon’s pillars have received. Tommie Shelby and Brandon M. Terry’s (2018) volume on King and Imant Perry’s (2018) study of Hansberry exemplify this tendency. An alternative to the tentpole approach, also with expansionist and fortificationist varieties, focuses less on iconic figures than on the broader sweep of the tradition that has grown up around the icons. The fortificationist approach here involves recovering the figures and ideas with which the icons were in conversation, thereby recovering not just the work of individual thinkers but also their enviroing epistemic communities and discursive contexts. This is the spirit in which Brittny Cooper’s (2017) Beyond Respectability recovers the work of Fannie Barrier Williams with the National Association of Colored Women at the turn of the twentieth century. The expansionist version of this approach studies neglected texts or figures, either to mine them for philosophical insight or to fill in otherwise piecemeal histories. In this spirit, John H. McClendon III and Stephen C. Ferguson II (2019) offer their remarkable new volume African Philosophers and Philosophy to press for the recovery of card-carrying academic philosophers of African descent. 6.2 Transforming schools and movements A second broad category of activity in contemporary African philosophy involves something like the improvisational approach discussed above. Here we find scholars creatively reinventing mainstream philosophical traditions, schools, and methods using resources from African thought. For reasons of space, I can only mention a few examples here, and must do so swiftly, on the way to covering this category with nowhere near the depth or breadth it deserves. The clearest examples of this transformative tendency often carry the same misleadingly simple adjectival labels as Cedric Robinson’s Black Marxism. Consider Gordon’s pioneering efforts, in Existential Africana (2000) and elsewhere, to define an African and decolonial mode of existential phenomenology, and to build what has become a globe-spanning intellectual community around it. Or consider what Gordon calls “African-American pragmatism,” which has continued to grow and develop in the wake of the germinal interventions by West and Harris (Gordon 2008, 93–99). Eddie Glaude (2007) in particular makes clear that this work is not simply about Black people and Blackness, especially in South Africa, where his fortunes and senses of themselves bound up in complicated ways with Africa’s prospects. It is unsurprising, then, that their place on the continent and, as we’ll see below, in the discipline, has become a subject of philosophical reflection. Samantha Vice’s (2010) germinal essay, “How to Live in This Strange Place?,” anchored a version of this discussion in South Africa.[5] 7. 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